



## Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

*A Complete Catechesis for Christian Living*

Doctrinal Catechesis Session  
Mary Birmingham

# Advent Overview and Spiritual Reflection



**Isaiah & Mary Icon, Sinai, 13th century.** Isaiah worshipping Mary and the Child. Mary is depicted as a “mother of god of the burning bush.” From a series of 10 similar icons with identical Madonna images and varying worshipping figures. Early 13th century. A copy can be made for use in the catechetical environment and can be downloaded from [Wikimedia Commons](#).



## Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### Opening prayer

Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
ever faithful to your promises  
and ever close to your Church:  
The earth rejoices in hope of the Savior's coming  
and looks forward with longing  
to his return at the end of time.  
Prepare our hearts  
and remove the sadness that hinders us  
from feeling the joy and hope  
which his presence will bestow,  
for he is Lord for ever and ever. Amen.

### Note to the Catechist

There may be more material than you can use in a one-hour session.  
Select and arrange accordingly. Use questions and material that are best  
suited for your particular group.



### Read the connecting statement

to draw the line between this week's  
liturgy and this chosen doctrinal theme.

This connecting statement is found in the **Breaking  
Open the Word** worksheet for this week.

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Version 2.0 reflects all recent revisions in  
the Roman Missal.

NIHIL OBSTAT  
Rev. Steven Olds  
Censor Liborum

IMPRIMATUR  
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# Sharing Human Experience

Catechist begins this session with these or similar remarks:

- ▶ Today's focus is the season of Advent with echoes of Christmas.
- ▶ Even though Advent and Christmas are distinct seasons, they must be considered together. They are integrally connected.
- ▶ Advent is a time of prayer and of hopeful waiting.
- ▶ It is a time to look within, to ask God to make us into the person he wants us to become as we wait for the manifestation of Christ anew in our hearts at Christmas.
- ▶ The season begins with the first evening prayer of the First Sunday of Advent.
- ▶ One way to remain true to the spirit of Advent is to clothe the space in Advent's liturgical color, the violet hues of purple, and to simply and starkly use symbols or art that reflect anticipation, justice, and the final *eschaton* (end of the world).
- ▶ Violet and the Advent wreath convey the cosmic nature of the season.
- ▶ The symbolism of the Advent wreath reminds us of the tension between light and darkness. It is a reminder of the time when people lived in spiritual darkness as they awaited the light, that is, the coming of the Messiah. As a new candle is lit each week the darkness dims and light increases.
- ▶ The Advent wreath evokes memories of two of our primary symbols, wood and light. Wood is reminiscent of the cross, the sign of salvation. The greens of the wreath reminds us of the life-giving season we celebrate. Advent looks forward to the cross of Easter upon which hinges the salvation of the world. The other characteristic of the Advent wreath that is important is the circular nature of the wreath—the pattern of dying and rising, the “window” into heaven, the doorway through which we encounter Christ.
- ▶ The candles of the wreath represent the four weeks of Advent and reminds us of Jesus Christ, the light who has come into the world. Four purple candles may be used or three purple candles and one rose colored candle representing Gaudete Sunday (a brief respite in the middle of Advent, a time out that tells us we have almost arrived at our destination. Four white candles may also be used. More important than the color is the symbol of fire and light.



## Blessing of an Advent wreath

Sign of the Cross

**Leader:** Praise the name of the Lord.

**All:** The Lord of heaven and earth.

**Leader:** During these days of waiting let us recall the great deeds of the Lord and that Christ came to save us. Let us remember our need for salvation.

Scripture

Invite a participant to read Isaiah 9:1-2, 5-6.

Brief silent reflection

Intercessions

Prayer of blessing

Let us ask God to bless us and to bless our Advent wreath.

Lord God almighty,  
we praise and thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus,  
the long-awaited Savior of the World.  
Through him we are saved.  
Send your blessing upon us as we light the candles of this wreath.

Bless all who stand in the glow of its light.  
May it remind us of your saving mission in the world.  
Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus,  
light in our darkness for ever and ever. Amen.

The first candle is then lighted.

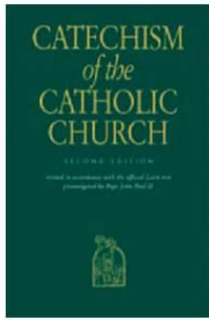
**Leader:** Let us bless God as we make the sign of the cross.

All may sing a familiar Advent hymn, such as “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

Catechist invites participants to respond to the flowing questions in dyads and then invites everyone to share relevant insights with the larger group.

- ▶ When we pray the blessing prayer for the Advent wreath, we ask that God come quickly and not delay.
- ▶ Have you ever had a time in your life when you were eagerly, perhaps even frantically, waiting for something?
- ▶ Try to remember that and call it forward.
- ▶ What was that like? What were the feelings?
- ▶ In looking back what did that waiting teach you?
- ▶ Did it give any meaning to your life? What would you say is the gift in waiting?





# Sharing Catholic Doctrine

Drawn from the Catechism of the Catholic Church

Catechist continues:

- ▶ Waiting can strengthen us, it can make that for which we wait even more precious, it can help us sort out our priorities, and it can challenge us to rely on God, to relinquish control of our lives.
- ▶ Waiting and the fulfillment of that for which we waited can help make us awestruck at God's advent in the midst of our waiting.
- ▶ The Church gives us an entire season for such waiting.
- ▶ The people of Israel knew what it meant to wait.
- ▶ They waited for a deliverer to take them out of the land of Egypt—to deliver them from bondage.
- ▶ They waited for the messiah, and still today they wait.
- ▶ Christianity understands that we no longer wait for the Messiah to come, but we do wait for his return.

## The Season of Advent: an overview

- ▶ Advent begins with the Sunday closest to November 30 and lasts until the first evening prayer of Christmas.
- ▶ Advent is a time of preparation both for recalling Christ's Incarnation at Christmas and for awaiting the future hope of Christ's second coming at the end of time. It is a time of joyful anticipation, waiting, longing, and expectation. (See *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*, GNLYC, #39.)
- ▶ Advent dates to the fifth century and was influenced by the Eastern Church.
- ▶ The focus was anticipation of Christ's birth.
- ▶ The earliest Roman observance dates to the sixth century.
- ▶ The original observance did not focus on Jesus' second coming.
- ▶ Other factors contributed to a shift in focus. Missionaries preaching God's judgment descended upon Gaul. They preached a message of repentance.
- ▶ Advent thus became associated with a call to repentance, echoing the character of John the Baptist and his constant call to repent.
- ▶ The Church dons purple vestments as a reminder of this repentance.
- ▶ The Church abstains from singing the joyful Gloria in anticipation of Christmas and in the service of repentance.

- ▶ While repentance is a focus, Advent's character is nonetheless different than that of Lent. Advent retains an undercurrent of joy.
- ▶ Each Advent is the inauguration of a new Church year, the liturgical year.
- ▶ Advent prepares us for the Incarnation of Jesus at Christmas, for the coming of the Savior.
- ▶ The premier Advent question becomes: "From what do I need saving?"
- ▶ The prophets of the season challenge us to wait for the Lord to come but remind us not to sit back and do nothing as we wait. They call us to biblical justice, to care for the poor and oppressed. The demands of justice are not suggestions; they are commands. Advent demands that we become advocates of justice.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions, first in dyads and then in wider group.

- ▶ How would you respond to the question, "From what do you need saving?"
- ▶ Saving is an ongoing reality. We might also use the word "conversion." What are the prophets of Advent calling you to look at in your life?
- ▶ Are there behaviors and attitudes from which you need to be saved?

Option: Catechist invites a parishioner to respond to this question by sharing an experience of what it means to be saved.

Option: Catechist similarly witnesses to an experience of being saved.

### Other Advent Themes: Universal call to justice

- ▶ During Advent we hear the prophets of old challenge the people to repent and change their lives.
- ▶ Advent calls all people to work for peace and justice.
- ▶ God called people then, and he calls us today to search out evil and work to rid the world of it.
- ▶ The prophets foretold that the light would come to shine in the midst of darkness.
- ▶ That light would be the Christ.
- ▶ Through the brilliance of his light we, too, are to light the way for others.
- ▶ Only Christ the light can dispel the darkness.
- ▶ Justice is God's command, but it is also his initiative and empowerment.

### Now and Not Yet

- ▶ Advent considers two realities: the reign of God now and the reign of God yet to come.
- ▶ We live in the midst of the tension of both worlds.
- ▶ We do not sit passively to wait for that future world.
- ▶ We cooperate with the work of changing history.
- ▶ We engage in human history to cooperate with God's ongoing work of redemption in the world.
- ▶ We struggle with the world that is as we wait in anticipation of the world to come.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following question.

- ▶ What does it mean to you that Advent calls you to be history makers?
- ▶ In what way are you called to be a history maker in your own world, where you live, work, pray, and play?

Catechist continues:

- ▶ Even though consumerism preoccupies the culture in the waning days of Advent, this holy season is a wake up call to the world. Advent is a counter-cultural plea to engage in the deeper meaning of the season. Advent invites us to reflect upon and prepare for the second coming of Christ, while looking forward to the celebration of the Incarnation, the ultimate gift of God's self to the world. We can do nothing less than ask ourselves the questions of human response and responsibility in the face of such a gratuitous gift.
- ▶ St. Bernard (1090-1153) summed up the meaning of Advent when he suggested that we celebrate three comings of the Lord during Advent. Two are visible, and one is invisible. The first coming was the coming of Christ in history, the Incarnation of Christ taking human flesh in order to save the world. The third and final coming will take place at the consummation of the world. The in-between coming is hidden. It is the coming of Christ in the hearts of disciples, the everyday Advent of Christ in the hearts of believers.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following question.

- ▶ St. Bernard says that Christ is present in the hearts of believers, thus saving such believers. Can you name ways that you know that God is within you and therefore you know you are saved?

Catechist continues:

- ▶ The First and Second Sunday of Advent focus on the future coming of Christ.
- ▶ The Third Sunday of Advent focuses on Christ who is present in our every day lives.
- ▶ The Fourth Sunday centers its attention on the birth of Jesus, the past coming.
- ▶ Advent and Christmas form a unity. Both seasons are dependent on each other; they complement one another and do not stand alone.
- ▶ Advent and Christmas are also viewed through the lens of Lent and Easter. Advent/Christmas looks toward the fulfillment of the Incarnation that is celebrated through the paschal mystery at Easter.
- ▶ Advent inaugurates a new liturgical year. It is a season of waiting.
- ▶ Malls have Christmas music piped in before the pumpkins are put away! Thankfully our Church does not give into this cultural temptation. Christmas songs are sung at Christmas. Advent songs are sung during the season of Advent, when we sing songs of longing and waiting.
- ▶ We discipline our lives and enter into the discipline of waiting, not only in our lives, but most importantly in our liturgy.
- ▶ It is difficult not to get swept away by the romantic images of Christmas that

permeate the season. One way to keep focus is by responding to the Isaiah's call to work for peace and justice.

- Some ways to do that are by participating in all efforts to provide for needy families, by praying more earnestly each day throughout the season, by keeping the Advent wreath ritual, and by keeping our focus on the reason for the season, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ—God taking human form and entering human history to save us.

Catechist prompts a wider group reflection on the following question.

- What might you do this Advent season to prepare for the coming of Christ in your heart?



## Community Connections

Catechist invites participants to relate what was shared today to some experience in their lives. Catechist shares an experience from his or her life and invites others to do the same.

Catechist invites participants to share the following question in the larger group. Allow five minutes for discussion.

- In what way does this teaching challenge you and the Christian community?

Catechist informs the group of any parish activity taking place and makes arrangements for group participation. For example: In light of all that was shared, what is taking place in the parish this week that invites participation of the participants? For example, “This week our parish is responsible for making Christmas gift baskets for needy families. We will meet in the parish hall to assist in this worthwhile project.”





## Mystagogy & your decision for change

Catechist invites participants to respond in faith to the following challenge by writing their response in their journal.

- ▶ Participants commit to a specific action, change of behavior, or attitude as a result of participation in today's session. Perhaps persons commit to a specific spiritual and corporal work of mercy in response to God's call.



## Closing Prayer

If this is a catechumenal session, end the session with Intercessions and Doxology ("Glory be to the Father..."), or a minor rite—a blessing or minor exorcism, RCIA #90-97.